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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether there was a difference in the level of academic achievement for African American students when instructed through lecture and discussion and cooperative learning methods in the social studies classroom. Participants were 58 African American 12th graders in an urban public school. A control group was instructed using traditional lecture and discussion, while an intervention group received instruction through the Jigsaw II method of cooperative learning. Students' academic achievement was assessed using a pretest-posttest evaluation. Both groups were observed for 96 minutes during their regular instructional time over 5 days. Data were also collected via student surveys and teacher interviews. Results indicated that there was no significant difference in academic achievement levels between students taught using cooperative learning and students taught using lecture and discussion. Intervention students working in heterogeneous groups exhibited a relatively frequent use of cooperative behaviors (e.g., interpersonal skills, cooperative communication, and cooperative physical behaviors). Most students were comfortable working in these groups. Teachers expressed some concerns with cooperative learning, including that students appeared to show more difficulty with and reluctance about cooperative activities. There were racial differences in students' reactions to working cooperatively. (Contains 45 references.) (SM)

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Is Cooperative Learning a Valuable Instructional Method for Teaching Social Studies to Urban African American Students?

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Is Cooperative Learning A Valuable Instructional Method For Teaching Social Studies To Urban African American Students?

Introduction

The use of a variety of curriculum methods and strategies in schools is a common aspect of most educational systems. Among the many instructional methods applied throughout schools, cooperative learning activities are at the forefront. The widespread usage of cooperative learning methods is largely based on the changing roles of the workplace. Many work organizations depend heavily on the work-team format for increased productivity and the enhancement of creativity for the organization. In an attempt to meet the requirements of the workplace and create team-oriented employees, schools have a strong motivation to train students to work together.

Other factors that influence the widespread usage of cooperative learning are based on social and cultural demands to create a global learning environment. The rationale behind the global learning theory typically includes creating a more socialized society and improving our understanding and respect for all

people. Based on these factors as well as other reasons, educators are realizing a major push to use cooperative or collaborative instructional methods in the classroom.

Currently, African American students represent approximately 17% of the 46.8 million students who attend public schools in the United States (Morris, 1999) and approximately 575 of the country's school districts are considered as urban districts (Argon, 1998). Furthermore, approximately 30% of the African American students in the United States attend schools located in large central cities (Morris, 1999). In addition, 53.8% of the schools in urban areas have a predominantly African American student population with African American students representing well over 50% of the student population in many urban areas (Morris, 1999).

Statistically, 60% of African American children live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1992). Over 57% of African American students live in single parent families (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1992). African American students are more likely to be born to very young, unwed mothers, they are more likely to be born with neurological disorders which may subsequently result in intellectual difficulties (Russo and Cooper, 1999). Single mothers

who are often working during the afternoon, evenings, and weekends head most of these families. Considering these circumstances, African American students are often placed in the position of being latchkey children (Laurent, 2000; Seligson and Fink, 1988; Will, 2001). This factor is critical because it places a considerable number of these students in the position of being independent and self-sufficient. In cases where there are older or younger siblings, these students are culturally trained to accept responsibility for themselves and their siblings at best (Seligson and Fink, 1988).

Research on African American students also indicates that in K-12 educational settings, African American students are most likely to be viewed as disciplinary problems (Irvine, 1990). Academically unsuccessful students are noted as "acting out" or displaying what Hanson and Silver cite as "presenting symptoms", (1991). In order to maintain order, urban schools begin teaching students a dysfunctional way of relating to authority in kindergarten (Haberman, 1997). Young students are controlled by authoritarian, directive teaching and simplistic, extrinsic rewards (Haberman, 1997).

Statement of Problem

The process of cooperative learning requires students to work in small heterogeneous groups to master material presented by the instructor (Parker, 1984; Farivar, 1992; Slavin, 1990). Furthermore, cooperative learning requires that the students analyze the lesson as a team, define specific roles, assume specific tasks, and ensure that each team member's tasks compliment and support the others (Aronson, 1978; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1990).

When considering the literature on cooperative learning, African American learning styles, African American culture, and the social and educational issues African American students face, it is possible that African American students will realize lower academic achievement when performing cooperative learning activities. Perhaps the lower academic performance of urban African American students when performing cooperative learning activities can be attributed to the conflict between the requirements for effective cooperative learning and the social, cultural, and educational background of urban African American students.

Research Question

The research question for this study was "Is there a difference in the level of academic achievement for African American students when instructed through lecture discussion and cooperative learning methods in the social studies classroom.

Review of Literature

Cooperative learning is viewed as a tool for preparing students to work in teams as required in various employment settings, in the home, and in the community when there is a need to combine energies and work towards a common goal (Mergendoller, 1989). Cooperative learning is a process by which students work together in groups to master material initially presented by the instructor (Slavin, 1990). Johnson and Johnson (1974) pioneered the concept of cooperative learning in business and economic education. Other definitions of cooperative learning include descriptions such as classroom environments where students interact with one another in small heterogeneous groups while working together on academic tasks (Parker, 1984).

When examining the various types of cooperative learning, the literature is fairly consistent in regard to the models and

methods of cooperative learning instruction. Research by Sapon-Slevin (1990) identifies three broad epistemological orientations, or meaning systems for the types of cooperative learning: transmission, transaction, and transformation. Research on major approaches to cooperative learning reveals eight classroom approaches: (1) Student Teams and Achievement Divisions (STAD), (2) Teams-Games-Tournaments, (3) Learning Together (LT), (4) Jigsaw (JIG), (5) Jigsaw II (JIG II), (6) Group Investigation (GI), (7) Team Accelerated Instruction (TAI), (8) and Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) (Mergendoller, 1989).

Often cited as an effective method of instruction, cooperative learning is given credit as having positive implications for student achievement as well as positive implications for student's social and cultural skills (Farivar, 1992; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1990). Research on student achievement, when cooperative learning is used, strongly indicates that cooperative learning can lead to increased cognitive-level skills and higher order thinking skills (Parker, 1984). Further analysis by Parker (1984) states that cooperative learning is responsible for significant achievement

gain scores particularly for high achieving students and low achieving students.

There is substantial research on the social and cultural benefits of cooperative learning. Hertz-Lazarowitz and Shachar (1990) found that there was a significant decline in students' boredom and disruptive behaviors in classrooms in which cooperative learning methods are used. Cooperative learning is also credited for increasing students' regard for one another generally, and increasing students' regard for classmates who are members of different ethnic or gender groups, or who are disabled (Johnson and Johnson, 1990; Slavin 1990).

Cooperation and cooperative behaviors are not guaranteed by simply placing students in groups and expecting them to work together (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). Farivar (1992) determined that many students lack these skills. Farivar states that this is particularly true of students who have had more years in schools where they have been discouraged or forbidden to work with classmates. Another critical problem with cooperative learning is the free-rider problem (Joyce, 1999). According to Joyce (1999), cooperative learning groups suffer due to a population of students who do not actively or constructively participate. Rather, these

students are passive and instead of assisting in the building of knowledge, these students only serve as recipients of the knowledge (Joyce, 1999).

In summarizing the skills required by students to perform cooperative learning, the literature indicates that there are specific skills required for effective cooperative learning groups. Johnson and Johnson (1990) listed five elements needed for successful cooperative learning: (1) positive interdependence, success being dependent on the success of other students; (2) face-to-face promotive interaction, actively promoting the learning of another student by encouragement, concern, and most important feedback; (3) social skills, positively interacting with others; (4) group processing, attempting to reach agreement or consensus on a solution, and (5) individual accountability, having students work up to their capabilities or avoiding the free-rider problem. Farivar (1992) states that cooperative learning requires basic social skills such as being able to disagree in an agreeable way, encouraging others to talk, or paraphrasing classmates' responses. It is also noted that many students lack the more sophisticated skills such as knowing what to do when they want to either receive or give help (Farivar, 1992).

Learning Styles

Research on learning styles strongly suggests that certain population groups have unique learning styles (Griggs, 1985). An example of this is how learning style elements tend to discriminate between gifted and regular students (Boultinghouse, 1984; Griggs, 1984). These learning styles range from being single or dual dimensional, represented by one or two variables on a bi-polar continuum, to being multidimensional and encompassing multiple learning style and cognitive style elements.

The most widely used assessment instrument is the Learning Style Inventory (Keefe, 1982). Of the various learning styles documented, most research indicates that African Americans display cognitive based learning styles (Melear, 1995; Hunt, 1995; Willis, 1989; Witkin, 1971). More specifically, of the three cognitive categories discussed, the predominant learning styles for African Americans are the personality and visual cognitive categories (Melear, 1994; Shade, 1982; Willis, 1989).

There are several learning styles that fall under the category of personality based cognitive styles. Of these styles, the ones most commonly associated with African American learners include affective or social/affective, person centered, expressive, and field

dependent (Graybill, 1997; Melear, 1994; Melear, 1995; Peeke and Steward, 1998; Shade, 1982; Willis, 1989). The affective or social/affective learning styles are identified as having characteristics that include holding values and personal belief systems as more important than logic and abstractions (Melear, 1995). According to Melear (1995), students with this learning style prefer learning in a more cooperative setting than a competitive setting. Based on this assumption, cooperative learning is recommended for students identified with this learning style especially in early grades (Melear, 1995). Melear (1995) also notes that because schooling is more impersonal and less affective as children proceed from K-12, students with this learning style feel a sense of isolation that ultimately leads to dropping out of school. Learners with this style also realize higher academic performance when given opportunity to voice their personal beliefs and utilize role-playing methods and non-competitive open-ended activities (Melear, 1995).

The person centered learning style involves reliance on the authority figure for clues and on the spoken and written language (Melear, 1995). Students with this type of learning style frequently

have to be told what the central point is when presented with several points (Melear, 1995).

Field dependent and field independent learning styles are two of the major learning styles within the category of personality-based cognitive learning styles. Herman Witkin (1971), considered the father of this theory, initiated the research on these constructs in the 1950s and 1960s (Witkin & Goodenough, 1981) and examined cognitive style in relation to various perceptual domains. Witkin describes field dependent and field independent cognitive styles as process variables that represent techniques for moving toward rather than a competence in achieving goals (1971).

Jonassen and Grabowski (1993) describe field dependent learners as having a global cognitive style because they more readily allow the external cues of an experience to point the way to understanding. In contrast, field independent learners ignore and even distrust external cues. A more detailed analysis of the field dependent learning style by Witkin (1971) reveals the following: field dependent learners have in general what may be characterized as an interpersonal orientation; field dependent learners seek both physical and emotional closeness to others, which in turn provides them with experiences in interpersonal relations; field dependent

learners pay selective attention to social cues; field dependent learners can be described as sociable, interested in people, wanting to help others, having concern for people, knowing many people, and being known by many; and groups including field dependent members have been found to be more effective in reaching a consensus than groups without them. Individuals who are unable to distinguish necessary parts in order to solve the problem are said to be more global and interrelated in their approach to visual information and are classified as field dependent.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The participants for the study were a convenient sample of 58 urban African American students in a public school system located in the southeastern United States. The school and the classes were selected because of the predominantly minority student population which was 97% African American. The students were 3rd and 4th block (on a four-period day schedule), 12th grade regular placement government students with each class serving as the control and the experimental groups respectively. Each class consisted of 29 students. The teacher was an African

American female who had been teaching in this setting for four years.

Procedure

This study was conducted based on a quasi-experimental design using a control group and an experimental group comparing for the academic achievement of both groups and the experimental group's level of comfort and feelings regarding their cooperative learning experience while controlling for the variables of age, race, and socioeconomic status. The control group was instructed using the lecture discussion method and the experimental group received instruction using through the Jigsaw II method of cooperative learning. There was a triangulation of five independent sources of data from the experimental group and one source of data from the control group.

All of the participants received instruction for the same unit of material based on the state mandated curriculum for a 12^{th} grade government course. The participants were measured for academic achievement using the same post-test evaluation instrument provided by McGraw-Hill. Both groups were observed for 96 minutes during their regular instructional time over a period of five days. The experimental group received cooperative instruction.

The classroom teacher divided the experimental group into five heterogeneous working groups with four to five students in each group.

Data Sources and Analysis

The data sources for this study included observations of student behaviors, student surveys, student test scores, and teacher interviews. The cooperative learning class was observed for the frequency of cooperative behaviors occurring during the cooperative learning activities. These behaviors were coded based on individual student behavior observed within the group setting using the Group Cooperative Behaviors Observation Form, developed by one of the researchers. This form included 20 indicators grouped into the following three categories: interpersonal skills, cooperative communication, and cooperative behaviors. The cooperative behaviors were ranked on a Likert type scale of 1-4 with four representing the most cooperative behavior.

Ten randomly selected students from the cooperative learning class also answered a 10-item student questionnaire. Students were asked to indicate their feelings and level of comfort about their cooperative learning experience. These responses were

ranked on a four-point Likert-type scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

A teacher interview was conducted and analyzed using standard techniques for analysis of qualitative data (Goetz & LeCompt, 1984). Questions for the teacher interview focused on the teacher's perceptions of experimental groups behaviors and performance when completing the cooperative lesson.

Results

In general, the data collected through student observations, student interviews, and student test scores indicated that there was no significant difference in the level of academic achievement between the students taught using cooperative learning and students taught using lecture and discussion.

The results of the student behaviors observed for the experimental group, which was instructed using cooperative learning, revealed that each heterogeneous working group exhibited a relatively frequent use of cooperative behaviors including interpersonal skills, cooperative communication, and cooperative physical behaviors. For the most part, the experimental group displayed the required cooperative behaviors required for

effective cooperative learning with an overall mean of 17.66 out of a possible 32. The highest and lowest mean for the five heterogeneous working groups was 22 and 11 respectively. It is interesting to note that of the three cooperative behavior indicators observed, the indicator of cooperative communication revealed the lowest scores in each of the five groups.

The initial analysis of the scores from the 10-item structured student interviews generated data that supported the findings of the Group Cooperative Behaviors Observation. The scores from the interviews conducted with select members of the experimental group were also analyzed based on the individual responses for each question. Further analysis indicated that 57% of the responses were strongly agree, 25% were agree, 11% were disagree, and 7% were strongly disagree in regard to the students' level of comfort and feelings concerning their cooperative learning experience.

The test scores generated by both the control group and the experimental group indicated that there was no significant difference in the level of academic achievement between the two groups. Of the students who participated in this study, 22 students from the control group and 23 students from the experimental

group took the unit test evaluating their understanding and comprehension of the material covered. The scores for the control group ranged between 43 and 92 with a mean of 67.59 out of 100 possible points. Less than 1% of the control group scored 80 or above (B average or above) while 36% of the students scored 63 or below (failure). Test scores for the experimental group ranged from 41-91 with a mean of 64.3. In the experimental group, less .04% of the students scored 80 or above (B average or above) and 39% of the students scored 63 or below (failure).

However, based on the perceptions of the classroom teacher gathered during the teacher interview, there appeared to be some concerns involved with the use of cooperative learning in her classroom. An example of the teacher's perceptions consists of the following:

> My students seem to show more difficulty with cooperative activities. A lot of the time, I don't get the impression they really want to participate in cooperative activities.

During the interview, the classroom teacher described some of the behavioral problems she observed.

> I have had trouble just getting them to get into their assigned groups and get started. They will sit and talk about other things but they don't want to discuss the group assignment.

Some of the most interesting perceptions expressed by the classroom teacher were in reference to the conflict she witnessed between the students in the all female group.

> Just last week, I had two of the Black female students argue and fuss because they did not want to work in the same group with each other. I was able to get one of the girls to go ahead and get started on the assignment but the other girl refused to work with her and said that she would rather get an F than work in a group with the other student.

When asked to give her reasons she perceived that the students realized difficulty when performing cooperative learning activities, she stated the following:

> I think a lot of these kids are not trained early on to work in groups. It seems like they have been in school settings that taught them to do as you are told, stay in your seat and probably included a lot of busy work and handouts, things that they did not need group help with. It is not that they cannot do the work; I think it is because they have not been trained to do it.

Discussion and Implications

With the exception of the classroom teacher's observations, the findings of this study support the literature on cooperative learning which states that cooperative learning is an effective method of instruction in general as well as an effective method of instruction for African American students (Csete, 1998;

Mergendoller, 1989; Reglin, 1994; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1990). However, the findings of this study indicate no significant academic gain for African American students.

The majority of the literature on African American learning styles suggests that African American learning styles are heavily associated with the cognitive personality based learning styles and visual/spatial oriented or perceptual learning styles (Melear, 1994; Shade, 1982; Willis, 1989). On the surface, this would infer that cooperative learning activities would be effective methods of instruction for African American students. The data collected in this study supports this inference by indicating that African American students did realize academic achievement equal to the academic achievement they would realize when being instructed through the lecture discussion method.

Despite the inference that students' academic achievement when instructed through cooperative learning is equal to their level of academic achievement when instructed through lecture discussion, the value of cooperative learning is still questionable. Considering the wealth of data emphasizing cooperative learning's value and its ability to generate high levels of academic achievement (Csete, 1998; Mergendoller, 1989; Reglin, 1994;

Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1990), the experimental cooperative learning group should have generated academic achievement greater than that realized by the control group. Perhaps this would have been the case if cooperative learning had been employed for a longer period of time.

When examining the data for the cooperative behaviors observed and the teacher interview, we find that cooperative grouping does not always yield cooperative behaviors as noted by Johnson & Johnson (1990). The interpersonal, communication, and behavioral difficulties observed between the students in the all female group support the literature emphasizing the need for specific skills for performing effective cooperative learning (Farivar, 1992; Joyce, 1999). It is also important to note that none of the groups observed for cooperative behaviors overwhelmingly displayed the five essential skills discussed by Johnson and Johnson (1990). Because the experimental group did not display superior academic performance in comparison to the lecture discussion group and because certain groups within the experimental group experienced difficulty working in cooperative groups, the findings of this study also corroborate the literature on

African American learning styles indicating that African American students demonstrate field-dependent traits.

In a more detailed analysis of the learning styles associated with African American students, cognitive personality based learning styles and visual/spatial oriented or perceptual learning styles, it is possible that the field dependent aspect of the personality based learning style may serve as a barrier for realizing increased academic achievement through cooperative learning. Because cooperative learning commonly involves separating the parts from the whole, a division of labor including separating parts of the assignment from the whole assignment, and completing that portion of the assignment in a manner that compliments the overall assignment, field-dependent learners may realize greater difficulties in successfully completing cooperative learning assignments. The difficulty African American students realize in completing cooperative learning assignments may directly impact their ability to realize higher academic achievement when instructed through cooperative learning.

This implies that if African American students have difficulty in separating individual assignments from the whole group assignment as well as have difficulty realizing how their

portion of the cooperative activity fits into the whole group assignment, it is only natural that African American students encounter greater difficulty in performing cooperative learning activities than students who are field-dependent learners. If the students do not have a clear understanding of what their assignments are, the likelihood of them successfully performing cooperative assignments is slim.

Further analyses of the data from this study and subsequent research findings help to generate five questions for future studies regarding African American students' and the use of cooperative learning activities for this student population.

The first question generated as a result of this study is: "What role does the student's age play in their ability to successfully perform cooperative learning activities?" Because the experimental population for this study displayed academic achievement equal to the achievement displayed when using the lecture discussion method, it may well be that 12th grade students are more likely to have the required skills necessary to effectively perform cooperative learning activities. However, it is possible that the students' age affect his or her ability to perform cooperative learning activities. Perhaps the older students are more capable of

performing cooperative learning activities because they have had additional time to develop the skills required to effectively perform cooperative learning activities.

The second question generated by the study is: "How does the students' previous educational experience and training in the early grades affect their ability to effectively perform cooperative activities?" This hypothesis directly correlates with the first question generated because the ages of the students' typically coincide with their grade level. Perhaps, regardless of gender, if students were trained and exposed to cooperative activities in the early grades (1^{st} – 6^{th}) they would demonstrate more ability to perform cooperative learning activities than those students who lack this training and exposure. It would also be logical to presume that students with this early training and exposure would realize higher academic achievement than students who lack this training and exposure when performing cooperative learning activities. Once again, the fact that the participants for this study were 12^{th} grade students supports the assumption that grade level serves as a critical factor in students' ability to realize academic achievement when using cooperative learning activities.

The third question generated is: "What role do team athletics play in a student's ability to perform cooperative learning activities?" In many cases African American males are more likely to be involved in athletic team activities; it is possible that African American males who have these experiences may have an advantage when performing cooperative learning activities. This would also be the case for African American females who have similar team athletic experiences.

The difference between the African American male and female perspectives of their experiences during cooperative learning activities is supported in their comments. The African American female student surveys revealed that they had greater feelings of anxiety and frustration when performing the cooperative activity than the male students. Specifically, one of the female respondents stated that she was very uncomfortable with the members of her group who were mostly female. It was also noted that this group experienced poor negotiation and conflict management/resolution skills. At one point the members of this group became argumentative causing members of the group who were previously actively participating to withdraw and limit their participation. This was not the case with any of the groups with

majority male participants, nor did any of the male participants express feelings of frustration or anxiety. These differences and the data gathered regarding African American males preference for team sports and athletics possible suggest that team activities such as basketball and football assist in the development of the skills required for successful cooperative learning.

The fourth question raised as a result of this study is "Why do African American females have such a high degree of anxiety and frustration with trusting others to perform tasks for them?" The data gathered through the teacher interview and group behavior observations strongly suggests that African American females had feelings of anxiety and frustration when working cooperatively. As stated in the third question, the mostly female group experienced significant conflict in comparison to the other mixed sex groups. Although the alliance among African American females the literature refers to does exist, it is typically with in the confines the family structure. This alliance can be seen between mothers and daughters and other inter-generational households where African American women serve as heads of these households, peer parents, and surrogate families. This alliance should not be inferred as a normal behavior between all or most African American females.

Conversely, there often exist a great deal of competition and personal rivalry among African American females. The issue of cooperative behaviors and cooperative alliances between and among African American females in general should not be assumed.

The fifth and final question generated by this study is: "What role does the student's socioeconomic (SES) status play in their preference for cooperative activities?" This is perhaps the most important question and perhaps the single most important variable when considering the implications of cooperative learning for African American students. Like many aspects of education, the student's socioeconomic status plays a major role in their level of academic achievement. Because the majority of the participants in this study were identified as being from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they share similar attributes and characteristics indicative of their background. The factor of SES offers an alternative explanation for the similarities in the level of academic achievement between the control and experimental groups.

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to develop characteristics that directly oppose cooperative learning skills. Because they are lower SES, these students

typically will have limited access to the activities that foster cooperative skills. Lower SES students are also commonly subjected to routine seatwork during their early grades. This is especially the case for African American male students whose behaviors and manner of communication are seen as disruptive and/or disrespectful (Irvine, 1990). Research has shown that this is particularly true when white female teachers instruct these students. Being members of the lower socioeconomic background also often forces these students to behave more independently in their home environment due to the single parent syndrome. In cases where there are older or younger siblings, these students are culturally trained to accept responsibility for themselves and their siblings at best (Seligson and Fink, 1988). Research on African American students from middle-class and upper middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds might generate substantially different findings. Future research should also include an examination of academic achievement for Caucasian students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds when instructed through cooperative learning for.

In conclusion, on the surface, the findings of this study support the implications of previous research, which indicates that

African American students are social in their learning habits. However, further analyses of the implications for this study also concur with the research that indicates African American students are field-sensitive learners creating a conflict in the literature and indicating possible issues when using cooperative learning as an instructional method for urban African American students. Future research exploring the implications of urban African American students' age, grade level, participation in team athletics, status as male or female, and SES status is recommended for a more definitive understanding of the value of cooperative learning for urban African American students.

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